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## Research Report

# China's claim to a new world order

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# SWP Comment

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## China's Claim to a New World Order

*Nadine Godehardt and Maximilian Mayer*

**This year's Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit in Tianjin marked the largest gathering in the organisation's history, drawing more than 20 heads of state and 10 representatives of international organisations. At the SCO+ session, China's Head of State and Party Leader Xi Jinping delivered a keynote address, prominently unveiling the Global Governance Initiative (GGI). For Beijing, development, security, civilisation, and governance constitute the four pillars of building a "community with a shared future for mankind", in essence, a new world order. Amid today's ongoing upheavals, it is imperative for Germany and Europe to recognize China as a global strategic challenge.**

In addition to the joint sessions of the SCO summit in Tianjin on August 31 and September 1, 2025, Xi Jinping held a series of bilateral meetings. These encounters simultaneously illustrated his pledge of inclusivity – granting equal attention to both major powers (such as India and Kazakhstan) and smaller states (such as Armenia and Belarus) – and embodied China's model of multilateralism, rooted in a web of bilateral ties. The diversity of participating countries highlights Beijing's drive to deepen transregional connectivity and broaden market access. Observer states (such as Armenia and Azerbaijan), dialogue partners (such as Cambodia and Myanmar), and guest states (such as Vietnam and Indonesia) all took part. Most notable, however, was the attendance of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Returning after seven years, Modi's presence suggests both the possibility of a renewed Sino-Indian rap-

prochement and Beijing's determination to draw New Delhi into its project of shaping the international order.

By presenting the GGI, Xi addressed an audience drawn from multiple regions. Central to the initiative are five principles. The first is the preservation of sovereign equality, regardless of a nation's size or its political and economic weight. Here, China emphasizes a shared sentiment with many Global South states that they remain underrepresented in today's international system. Within this framing, Beijing consistently advocates a "democratization of international relations". What stands out, especially for European observers, is the deliberate reinterpretation and deployment of familiar political terminology by Chinese diplomacy.

Second, China calls for respect for international law, the United Nations (UN) Charter, and the generally recognized norms of international relations. This commitment



is echoed in numerous foreign policy documents, including the 2023 Global Security Initiative (GSI) concept paper, which emphasizes the need to respect sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the principles enshrined in the UN Charter. At the same time, it stresses the importance of taking the “legitimate security concerns” of all states into account. From a European perspective, however, such claims often appear contradictory (see the box below), particularly in the context of the GGI announcement and Russia’s prominent role at the SCO summit.

Third, China emphasizes the implementation of multilateral cooperation as a cornerstone of international relations. In this regard, the GGI adopts elements from the Belt and Road Initiative, particularly the formula of “joint consultation, joint contribution, and joint benefit”. From Beijing’s perspective, these principles stand in contrast to Western — or specifically United States (US) — dominated decision-making processes. They underscore shared responsibility among all participants, rather than the coercive influence of a few, and promote the notion of win-win cooperation.

Fourth, China promotes a “people-centred” approach, a formulation deeply embedded in Chinese Communist Party (CCP) discourse and now projected onto the international stage. Through this narrative, Beijing positions itself as moving beyond bloc politics to address global challenges, such as poverty reduction, connectivity, health, and climate protection. China presents itself as an advocate of development for all, framing this principle as central to a new international order, as the leadership previously did in the context of its Global Development Initiative.

Fifth, China emphasizes the importance of implementing the GGI. The focus, Xi stresses, is not on rhetoric but on tangible results. In this sense, the SCO itself is already framed as both a model and an embodiment of the initiative. More broadly, Beijing seeks to foster alignment with Chinese concepts and norms across various international contexts. In this way, Chi-

### **Example: Xi’s “Four Musts” (四个应该, *Sige Yinggai*)**

President Xi introduced the “four musts” during a video summit with the leaders of France and Germany immediately after Russia launched its war of aggression against Ukraine. To date, they remain the most concise articulation of China’s position. First, they affirm respect for national sovereignty and territorial integrity. Second, they stress adherence to the UN Charter and its principles. Third, they call for recognition of the legitimate security concerns of all states. Fourth, Xi emphasizes China’s support for a peaceful resolution of the “crisis”. The first two “musts” are framed by the Chinese as “principles” of the international order, the third reflects its reality, and the fourth is more represented as a “future goal or interest”. Chinese scholars interpret the “four musts” as four pillars of foreign policy, constituting a “comprehensive” approach. When confronted with the apparent contradiction between the two “principles” and the notion of “legitimate security concerns”, Chinese officials point instead to the comprehensiveness of their policy portraying these not as contradictions or double standards, but as distinct logics integrated into a single framework.

nese ideas and concepts can be established as the basis for a new world order. At the same time, the CPC is consolidating its international autonomy, particularly in relation to the US and Europe.

### **Relevance for Germany and Europe**

Against this backdrop, the SCO summit and Xi Jinping’s announcement of the GGI hold significant relevance for Germany and Europe. Mechanisms and organisations led by China can no longer be dismissed as mere “talking shops”. Under Xi, the CPC leadership has steadily expanded its *convening power*. The term refers to China’s capacity to bring together diverse states and groups on a regular basis to deliberate on

specific issues. This form of soft power differs from formal leadership. Instead, it provides ostensibly “neutral” platforms for dialogue and produces flexible agreements without imposing universal normative conditions. It is a type of leadership that does not impose universal (normative) conditions. *Convening power* thus enables leadership without responsibility, as illustrated by China’s unwillingness to hold partners (e.g. Russia) accountable for actions like the war in Ukraine. In today’s interregnum of global order – marked by fragmenting power relations and the erosion of traditional structures that once ensured stability – such *convening power* has grown increasingly important. The current interregnum creates openings for Beijing to position itself as a responsible and inclusive broker of the international order, or even as promoting its redesign. A case in point is the framing of the SCO as an embodiment of “real multilateralism” (真正多边主义, *zhènzhèng duōbiān zhuyì*), based on equality among states and defined in contrast to US hegemony and Western double standards.

Xi’s tendency to make sweeping policy announcements, especially in the realm of foreign affairs, can no longer be dismissed as the repetition of “empty concepts”. Behind China’s global initiatives lie not only coherent narratives, but also hard-nosed interest-based politics. As Xi reaffirmed at the SCO summit, Beijing’s central objective is to reshape the global governance system. In practical terms, this involves adapting the UN framework to Chinese preferences while embedding its own principles, including its legal interpretations. This is not a distant prospect but a process already underway. Over the past five years, Xi has articulated and consolidated this vision through four global initiatives – on development, security, civilisation, and governance – which feature prominently in his summit speeches, bilateral meetings, and (inter)national public diplomacy efforts, and are often supported by Chinese think tanks. It is at the intersection of *convening power* and discursive power that this influence becomes most

visible. The effects of discursive power are already evident, particularly in the construction of an independent international discourse system that redefines the idea of international law as well as concepts such as development and technology policy.

## China’s New Imperial Quality

China’s discourse and practices under Xi display imperial qualities. Here, “imperial” is understood less in a strictly military-expansionist sense and more as referring to the subtle production of centre-periphery relationships that contribute to maintaining the autonomy and security of the CPC. In this framework, the CPC and, geographically, the People’s Republic of China constitutes the centre. The peripheries, by contrast, are not necessarily defined by national borders or geographic proximity. Instead, they take the form of smaller, varied spheres of influence. A case in point is the control Chinese actors exert over digital, economic, and financial infrastructures in other states, as well as over transnational supply and value chains.

The SCO summit reflects various facets of this new form of imperialism. Foremost is China’s expanding influence over the economic and infrastructural frameworks of regional states, facilitated by Chinese financial support. A prominent example is the proposed SCO Development Bank, designed to allow both sanctioned and non-sanctioned member states to channel funds through a multilateral institution denominated in renminbi (RMB). Complementing this initiative, Beijing has pledged an additional 10 billion RMB in loans to the member banks of the SCO Interbank Consortium (SCO IBC) over the next three years. Xi has also offered SCO states the possibility of adopting China’s BeiDou satellite navigation system as an alternative to US-controlled Global Positioning Systems (GPS), thereby further extending Chinese technological influence.

The *second* facet of China’s new imperialism lies in its strategic cultivation of informal

access to SCO member states, particularly to political and economic elites willing to grant Chinese actors partial control over national or local economic processes. Recurring meetings on the sidelines of the SCO summits (or other China-plus-x formats) further consolidate transnational ties between Chinese companies and local partners. Additional business-oriented mechanisms within the SCO reinforce this dynamic. For example, on 17 July 2025 six weeks prior to the Tianjin summit, the SCO Business Forum convened some 400 business and government representatives, with discussions centred on the green transformation of the energy sector – which was also a key summit theme. Shortly thereafter on 6 September, SCO economic ministers reconvened in Vladivostok to consolidate the summit's results. Alongside these events, a proliferation of consortia and forums within the SCO has provided regular platforms for interaction among a wide range of actors, deepening China's influence across multiple levels.

The *third* facet of Beijing's new imperialism is its effort to build an ever-expanding network of bilateral partnerships. The objective is not to forge formal alliances, but rather to extend differentiated privileges to selected partners. These may include financial contributions to institutions, such as the SCO Development Bank or SCO IBC, or preferential access to technologies developed under SCO environmental cooperation. This makes bilateral meetings at multilateral summits especially significant for the Chinese government. In practice, China frequently employs a “divide and rule” strategy, supplanting traditional balance-of-power politics. The benefits for Beijing are not always immediately measurable. At times, they manifest through symbolic gestures, such as when states endorse the “One China principle”, which Beijing seeks to entrench as an international norm. The support of this principle by Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan made on the sidelines of the summit following the announcement of a strategic partnership with China, illustrates this tendency.

The *fourth* facet of China's imperialism is its success in spreading ideas and persuading others to adopt them. China's foreign policy concepts, particularly the Global Initiatives, exhibit a notable degree of internal coherence. At the SCO summit, Xi underscored his vision of reshaping the world order, with a central focus on transforming the UN system and thereby altering the global framework within which international politics unfolds. This effort can also be read as an attempt to legitimize China's actions in the South China Sea, Taiwan, the Arctic, and in various technological domains.

## Lessons for Germany and Europe

It becomes evident that Germany and Europe must adopt a broader perspective on China. At present, engagement is largely structured around three core areas. First, both the European Union (EU) and Germany seek to uphold the principles of fair trade. New EU instruments, such as anti-subsidy and anti-dumping tariffs or the regulation on third-country subsidies, are also designed to counter unfair Chinese practices. German and European representatives also consistently raise the issue of limited market access for European companies in China. Concessions, however, remain rare: Whenever restrictions are eased, new regulatory hurdles for foreign firms typically emerge. Second, unilateral dependencies must be identified and reduced. Above all, this applies to China's near-monopoly in processing critical raw materials and its global dominance in the battery supply chain. Third, German and European policymakers repeatedly highlight close ties between China and Russia, criticizing both the political rapprochement between the two states and Beijing's tolerance of dual-use exports to Russia. These three core areas are central to safeguarding German and European interests, as clear prioritisation would enable more effective use of limited capacities and resources.

However, there is a danger that the global-strategic perspective may be neglected in Europe's approach to China. Concentrating too narrowly on the three core areas — already complex in themselves — risks obscuring the broader picture. Put differently, the forest (China's global ambitions and emerging imperial posture) may be overlooked for the trees (three core areas). The challenge for German and European policymakers is not to play these priorities against one another, but to pursue them while at the same time considering China's global strategic significance.

Xi's initiatives are already shaping the principles of the current interregnum. Germany and Europe cannot afford nostalgia for the liberal order of the past, as central elements of that order are being redefined or supplanted by Beijing. While China formally supports an "international law-based international order", it seeks to reinterpret international law in ways that serve its own interests and to introduce new principles, such as the obligation to recognize the "legitimate security concerns" of all states, even when these infringe on the sovereignty of others. For Germany and Europe, the current interregnum poses a fundamental challenge of deciding which elements of the rules-based order should be defended or renewed. Engagement with China's ideas and initiatives is closely linked to this challenge. Bilateral relations remain important, but they must be complemented by sustained, strategically anchored engagement with Chinese discourse and practices on international order. Diplomacy here functions not only as negotiation, but also as information gathering strategy. For this reason, German and European representatives, at least at the second and third political levels, should attend China-initiated summits, while European researchers should participate in public diplomacy events to more assertively project European narratives. Beyond advancing concrete interests, European diplomacy must finally acknowledge China's global strategic weight.

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